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## ABSTRACT

So far as excellence exists, it exists relative to something else such as the historical age, the chronological age of the creator, the societal conditions under which creation takes place, and the limitations of the physical world. While excellence is sought and revered, it is often made to serve ulterior ends such as higher pay, higher scores on tests, or higher grades--an intrusion shifts the focus from excellence to something else. In education, excellence has come to be judged on an industrial model of efficiency and products that has distorted the educational process. The subject of English has been reduced from the deep, mysterious, and panoramic miracles of speech and literature to drill exercises on spelling, punctuation, and grammar. These latter tasks could be taught as well by computers as by human teachers, and using such aids might allow teachers to stop the suffocating lock-step at which students presently go through the educational system. Through excellent teaching of English, teachers may help students come to intellectual and ethical excellence along with developing knowledge, skills, and values to help them achieve the best of which they are capable.

(TJ)

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TOWARD DIRECTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE

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My wife, Jo Ann, understands the hesitancy in my title, my failure to tackle immediately and head-on the theme for this conference, Directions for Excellence. She has lived with me long enough to know that I am congenitally incapable of following directions. She could tell you, for example, that ever since we departed Berkeley and lost San Francisco Bay as a marker, I have been trying to refind the West. For six of the eight years we lived in Urbana, Illinois, I was routinely lost. Sent out on errands, I invariably ended up unintentionally exploring rutted back roads on the prairie; finally, the family bought me an auto compass, which, while lacking the unfailing instincts of a homing pigeon or the technological precision of radar, at least kept me headed toward my intended destination. So, as one who on a high-school physics test worked out a formula that floated lead and sank cork and who cannot tell north from south, I am unwilling to offer recipes or directions to anyone for anything, particularly for something as awesome as excellence. The best I can offer is the humble preposition toward.

But even if I could master directions myself and felt more confident about providing them to others, I doubt that I could offer you a formula for excellence. The word connotes to me a quest toward a Platonic ideal, an endless reaching out toward ever unreachable goals, ones that exist in an ethereal plane uncluttered by the things of this, oh-so-material, world. This is not to deny that some books are better written than other books, some products more carefully constructed than other products, some artistic performances more aesthetically executed than other performances, some human acts more admirably moral than other acts. Rather, it is to say that to the degree that something is excellent, it is so relative to something else, and that it still falls far short of whatever perfection its creator may have conceptually sought.

As able as able people are, they are rarely satisfied with the current state of their abilities. I have never taught a class of graduate students who, upon being asked, did not confess they wished they were better readers. I have never talked to groups of teachers without finding many, among them often the most brilliant, who harbored fears that they were bluffing, that they knew next to nothing, that it would only be a matter of time till they were exposed as the ignoramuses they were. I have never met professional writers who have been entirely satisfied with their writing.

When I think of writing and the exhausting mental deliberations it requires of each of us in our usually barren search for the perfect word, the flawless phrase, the ideal sentence that will order our inchoate thoughts and feelings, I am reminded of a story about Robert Frost. As legend now has it, Mr. Frost had assigned the first composition of the term to his freshman class at Amherst, where he was then visiting professor. On the day the papers were due, Mr. Frost collected them and then proceeded to ask, "How many of you think your composition is the very best writing you can do? Raise your hands." When no hands went up, Mr. Frost walked over to the wastepaper basket and dumped the papers with the comment, "Surely you wouldn't want me to evaluate anything less than your very best; would you?"

The story, even if apocryphal, is amusing; further, it satisfies in teachers of English their twofold desire to maintain high standards while simultaneously lightening their loads. Nevertheless, Mr. Frost--if the anecdote is true--was unfair, for he tricked his students by exploiting what he already knew about human nature, namely, that few writers will say that any piece of writing represents the very best they can do. In our search for excellence, we are all Jimmy Durante pounding the piano in search of the lost chord.

As I have said, so far as excellence exists in the world, it exists relative to something else and, being of this world, is fated to fall far short of perfection. And since it is of this world, excellence, at least in its sensate states, is subject to the permutations of time. Long ago, Samuel Johnson observed in The Rambler, no. 201, "So much are the moles of excellence settled by time and place, that men may be heard boasting in one street of that which they would anxiously conceal in another." Though the sentiments of Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" and of Keats in "Ode on a Grecian Urn"--that art endures long past the span of its creator--are ones I support, even art is subject to the vicissitudes of time and taste. Hemingway is out, Faulkner is in; Blake is big, Tennyson is in decline; Robert Lowell's reputation was inflated, Adrienne Rich is major.

In reading an article recently (Time, Nov. 27, 1978) on Tish Baldrige, the new arbiter of American manners, I was reminded of how quickly taste changes. The article notes that in 1922 Emily Post, the then grande dame of what constitutes excellence in etiquette, wrote:

A young girl may not, even with her fiancé, lunch in a road house without a chaperon, or go on a journey that can by any possibility last over night. To go out with him in a small sail-boat sounds harmless enough, but might result in a questionable situation if they are becalmed, or if they are left helpless in a sudden fog.

Mrs. Post goes on to tell of a young lady and gentleman who sailed out from Bar Harbor and who, because of heavy fogs, did not return until next day.

"Everyone knew the fog had come in as thick as pea soup and that it was impossible to get home; but to the end of time her reputation will suffer for the experience."

If the woman is still alive, I venture she must be close to eighty, and I stand ready to forgive her. In the age of Saturday Night Fever, Animal House, and wholesale pornography, she has suffered long enough.




Excellence is relative not only to its own times but to the chronological age of the creator and to the conditions under which creation takes place. We do not ask of the thirteen-year-old, cloistered Anne Frank the mastery of diaristic style that we ask of the mature, unrestricted Anaïs Nin; nor do we, nor should we, expect of third graders what we expect of twelfth graders. As Publilius Syrus, who flourished in the first century B.C., noted in his *Maxim* 780, "It takes a long time to bring excellence to maturity."

To remind us of that fact, we need to go back to our own work at times, to the drawings, poems, essays, stories we produced as youngsters. If we play musical instruments, we need to recall those early lessons, those clumsy fledgling attempts to produce notes that could fly. If we paint, we need to recollect our early unsuccessful efforts to master perspective. In addition, those of us who have been around awhile need to remember those students, many of them seemingly untalented, who left our classes and went on to achieve distinction in various walks of life--as lawyers, doctors, writers, contractors, electricians, automobile mechanics, and, yes, plumbers, for, like many of you, I am mindful of John Gardner's warning in Excellence (Harper & Row, 1961):

An excellent plumber is infinitely more admirable than an incompetent philosopher. The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

Yet, even though excellence, to be most fully realized, is dependent on the maturity of the performer or creator, I am constantly surprised by the levels of excellence young people achieve. They may not be able to sustain the heights for long, but when they reach them even briefly, they leave the beholder humbled. Look for example at the prose written by five-to-ten-year-olds and collected by Richard Lewis for his volume Journeys: Prose by Children of the English-Speaking World (Simon and Schuster, 1969); read Josef and

Dorothy Berger's Small Voices: A Grownup's Treasury of Selections from the Diaries, Journals, and Notebooks of Young Children (Haul S. Eriksson, Inc., 1967)  use leisurely the recently published Linotte: The Early Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1914-1920 (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

Nor should one exclude the published writing of young people who come from financially deprived backgrounds. During the past decade, a number of paperbacks have featured the work of youngsters who live in ghettos or on reservations. Among these paperbacks are: The Me Nobody Knows: Children's Voices from the Ghetto (Avon, 1969); Me the Flunkie (Fawcett, 1970); Can't You Hear Me Talking to You? (Bantam, 1971); and Arrows Four: Prose and Poetry by Young American Indians (Washington Square Press, 1974). A person reading these books needs to bear in mind the difference between graphic literacy (the ability to punctuate, spell, and capitalize correctly) and fluent literacy (the ability to express effectively one's feelings and thoughts in writing). As David Holbrook made clear in English for the Rejected (Cambridge University Press, 1964), one may lack the skills associated with graphic literacy but nevertheless, like Sacco and Vanzetti, communicate effectively, even powerfully.

To curb our inclination to bleed red ink prematurely over the papers of the students who have not yet mastered graphic skills, Mr. Holbrook suggests we read their papers as though we are reading poems by E. E. Cummings or Molly Bloom's stream-of-consciousness reveries; that is, that we read for meaning despite the absence of conventional graphic markers. Mr. Holbrook's point is clear: if we do not respect what students are trying to say, if we do not appreciate the efforts, however contorted the results, they have made in attempting to communicate, we will scarcely convince them that proficiency in spelling or punctuation is a goal worth attaining.

When we honor what we find to be excellent in the work of a young person whose financially impoverished circumstances have denied him access to resources

affluent youngsters take for granted, we do not debase standards. Rather, we elevate the prevailing standard of the individual and of the group. Again I assert my belief that in its conversion from conceptual ideal to earthly reality, excellence becomes contaminated by the limitations of the physical world. All human creations suffer from contamination, though obviously some are more corrupted than are others. And, in some, the excellence and the corruption are so wedded that we would not appreciate the former without the existence of the latter. As Sir W. Honeywood comments in Oliver Goldsmith's The Good Natur'd Man, "There are some faults so nearly allied to excellence that we can scarce weed out the vice without eradicating the virtue." In the writing of youngsters living in ghettos, one often finds amidst the brambles of tense problems, misspellings, and contorted syntax, the flowering of fresh turns of phrase and unexpected and telling insights into life, all nurtured by a healthy candor rarely found in the papers of prosperous middle-class students.

Because it is relative to the chronological age of the individual, to the act performed or the product produced, to the societal circumstances under which creation or enactment takes place, and to the historical age in which the creation or performance occurs, excellence resists absolute standards. Nobody now living would care to be operated on by a physician employing methods approved in the eighteenth century, regardless of the surgeon's reputation. The fifteen-foot pole vault, a standard of track excellence when I was young, appears quaint today to vaulters sporting Adidas wear and equipped with fiberglass poles. Last year's USDA "Good" sirloin is this year's "Choice."

Nevertheless, within the boundaries imposed by its relative nature, excellence continues to be sought out and revered by those best trained or educated to know it. Carpenters recognize the work of an artisan among them; lawyers know those in their profession whose knowledge of the law and personal integrity are unassailable; professional football players can name the individuals in their ranks noted for playing both brilliantly and cleanly. As



James Conant observed in a baccalaureate sermon delivered at Harvard in 1940, "Each honest calling, each walk of life, has its own elite, its own aristocracy based on excellence of performance."

Classroom teachers have rarely endorsed a system of merit pay, not because they do not know who among them are superb teachers, but because they are not convinced that administrators invariably know. The ostensible stars of the profession--teachers to whom yearbooks are dedicated and who are cited in school newspapers as favorites of student-body leaders--are rarely those who day after day, year upon year, face classrooms of inarticulate, illiterate, or semiliterate students. And it is in this latter group of the unheralded and unsung that we often find meritorious teaching.

Probably the finest teacher with whom I have taught was a woman who annually elected to teach five classes of remedial reading. Although her quiet dignity, her patience, her humane compassion, and her respect for the subject touched deeply the lives of her students--the linguistically inept of the school--she was scarcely known outside the English department. Those who enrolled in her courses were not the teenagers who talk enthusiastically to counselors and to peers about what a great teacher they have for reading, nor were the parents of her students the ones who show up at PTA meetings and back-to-school nights to meet a teacher and thank her personally for all she has done for their children.

The woman I have in mind is long dead, her last year of teaching carried out with her usual high level of skill and her accustomed composure and warmth toward students, even though throughout that year she was undergoing painful cobalt treatments and knew she was dying of cancer. When I think of Anya, as I do from time to time, I find Emily Dickinson's "To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave" associated with my memories of her:

To fight aloud is very brave,  
 But gallanter, I know,  
 Who charge within the bosom  
 The cavalry of woe.

Who win, and nations do not see,  
 Who fall, and none observe,  
 Whose dying eyes no country  
 Regards with patriot love.

We trust, in plumed procession,  
 For such the angels go,  
 Rank after rank, with even feet  
 And uniforms of snow.<sup>1</sup>

Beyond distrusting administrators who would evaluate by the same criteria both teachers of the intellectually gifted and teachers of the mentally handicapped, those of us in English have rightfully resisted the intrusion of a profit incentive into a service vocation. Many of us entered teaching because we tired of the business world. We saw classrooms as places for the creation of human community, oases where open communication might take place without either party--teachers or students--protectively guarding their language while mentally clutching their wallets, fearful of being bilked by ideas. Students know we are paid for what we do, in part from taxes paid by their parents; most of the time they also know we use grades to pay them for their efforts. But those matters are usually in the background where they belong, rather than in the forefront.

When students begin to worry too much about grades, as many of them are now doing because of pressures associated with the "back-to-the-basics" movement, or when teachers become overly concerned with their "productivity," a productivity tied to discriminatory financial rewards, communication becomes tainted, and something sours in the classroom. Rather than fostering excellence as an end unto itself, as something that by its very merit provides its own intrinsic rewards, we manipulate excellence by making it serve ulterior ends --higher pay, higher grades, higher scores on tests. The carrot at the end of

the stick, rather than the performance itself, becomes honored.

What is inherently wrong in American education is that its processes continue to be warped by the processes of an archaic industrial model that has been imposed upon it. The model not only severely restrains the intellectual and psychological growth of students and teachers but ill serves the needs, human and materiel, of a postindustrial, cybernated society, which depends more on information processing than on linear factory production.

In Education and the Cult of Efficiency (University of Chicago Press, 1962), Raymond Callahan persuasively makes the case that, until the turn of this century, an educational administrator was essentially an educational philosopher, a person who articulated the curriculum to the community on philosophical grounds. But with the growth of industry in this country, with the tax monies for the schools being predicated largely upon taxes on industry, and with the time-motion studies conducted in industry by Frederick Taylor, Frank Gilbreth, and others, administrators increasingly were called upon to defend what was taking place in schools not on the grounds of its philosophical worth but on the grounds of its efficiency. The consequence was that administrators allied themselves with industrial leaders, and instead of interpreting the will of educators to the business community, they were soon interpreting, and enforcing upon educators, the will of businessmen. Within a short time the school was viewed as being analogous to an industrial plant ("school-plant planning"); administrators, rather than being at the service of teachers, were seen as employers, and, as befits those in power, they surrounded themselves with the secretarial help, telephones, and office machines that one finds in the quarters of most professionals; and teachers, though assured they belonged to a noble profession, were treated as workers on an assembly line, responsible for processing so many students ("work load") through so many courses over so many years (Carnegie units), following which students were labeled as products of the institution.

As teachers, we know that each student is unique, but the model does not. Forced to try to teach far too many students at a time, we reluctantly compose assignments for groups when we would prefer tailoring them for individuals. As teachers, we know that humans learn in sporadic ways, but the model does not. Compelled to parcel out subjects in forty-to-fifty minute segments, we are dictated to by bells rather than by the curiosity of learners. As teachers, we know that we are surrounded by an electronically transmitted aural/visual environment, but the model does not. Our classes lack the very equipment which provides contemporary students with most of their information if not the majority of their values--television sets, AM/FM radios, stereophonic record and tape players.

When students complain that much of their schooling is irrelevant to their lives, I am not surprised. What does surprise me is that the quality of American education, given the constraints of an inappropriate industrial model from which the institution has not yet managed to free itself, remains as high as it is. Until that model changes, until as teachers we have at our command videotape recorders and TV sets, radios, records, stereo players, cassettes, and books and magazines galore; until we have the paraprofessional help and the flexibility in programming that would permit us, depending upon the appropriateness of the occasion, to tutor individuals, to lead discussions with small groups, or to lecture; until we have the professional status accorded administrators, including the human and mechanical aids that assist other professionals, we will not be able to help each student bring to full fruition whatever dormant or budding excellence lies within.

Ironically, current emphasis on basic skills measurable by standardized tests, rather than promoting excellence, is a deterrent, one more example of how

curriculum becomes shaped by what is fiscally efficient rather than academically sound. Because they are difficult and costly to assess, proficiencies in oral communication, in written composition, and in listening are ignored by the tests. Because they have no immediate pragmatic value in the marketplace, comprehension and appreciation of literature and of nonprint media are dismissed in favor of the ability to read want ads, employment forms, and tax guides. English, a subject as deep and mysterious as the repetitive miracle that is human speech and as grand in scope as the panorama that is literature, is laid out on a computerized Procrustean bed and cut to minuscule size. Doubly ironic, teachers who are compromised by emphasis upon basic skills, who replace the humanistic core of English with drill exercises on spelling, punctuation, and grammar, may find themselves obsolete within the decade.

Already one can purchase from Texas Instruments for \$9.89 the Little Professor, a calculator programmed to teach youngsters computational skills; for \$19.90, one can own the Spelling B Electronic Learning Aid, which uses word-picture association techniques and is programmed with three levels of difficulty for grades K-4; and for \$55.00, one can possess Speak & Spell, which has an alphabetic keyboard and two memory banks containing two hundred words frequently misspelled by children of ages seven through twelve. The device pronounces clearly each word to be spelled, can play competitive games to stimulate a learner's interest, and delivers verbal praise to maintain motivation. By the end of this year, memory banks containing more difficult words should be available. During this past Christmas season, Radio Shack widely advertised its TRS-80 Microcomputer. The advertisement featured a picture of a young couple, presumably married, looking on proudly as their two pre-teenage children played with a computer next to the family Christmas tree. Copy for the ad included these appeals to parental pride and guilt:



The priceless gift of learning now has a price: \$599.... And now, at last, your child has a chance to discover Tomorrow on Christmas morning.

"Tomorrow" is an electronic world, based on computers--and it's already here. In it your child can be a number in a machine. A robot. Because he or she does not understand either the number or the machine. Or your child can be pleasurably elevated into this brave new world with a gift that has only become affordable [sic] in recent months.

The Radio Shack personal computer surely ought to be on the gift list of every concerned parent....

In your lifetime the possibility of owning or giving a computer--up to now--was unthinkable. A computer? That can teach? Remember? Display on its own screen? Play games? Complete with a standard typewriter keyboard? Unthinkable--up to now.<sup>2</sup>

I do not know how many parents succumbed to that rhetoric and did the right thing by their offspring last yuletide, but I do know that the message is clear: refinements in microcircuitry, which continue to reduce both the size of units and their cost, are revolutionizing electronic communication systems and are decentralizing education, particularly those aspects associated with rote learning and pattern practice. Since formal education is labor intensive, with the bulk of school revenues being allocated to salaries, teachers who persist in doing what calculators and computers can do more patiently, more thoroughly, and far less expensively may shortly find that they have gone the way of pinsetters in bowling alleys and elevator operators in hotels.

Rather than jousting with a force we cannot stop, particularly one that could serve our best interests, we should encourage school boards to make available to students any technological aids that might accommodate differences in the pace and style by which individuals master skills. Used wisely, such aids could destroy the suffocating lock-step at which students presently go

through our systems. Used wisely, they could free teachers of English to engage students in the study of language and literature as human phenomena, requiring for their understanding and appreciation face-to-face human dialogue.

We are the custodians of a rich heritage. Ours is a subject that concerns itself not just with usage or spelling but with language in all its myriad dimensions and forms--philology, linguistics, semantics, stylistics, lexicography, phonology, dialectology; it is a subject that analyzes not just rules of punctuation and capitalization but the act of written composition--its various processes and its forms, including the subtle ways in which audience and occasion determine an author's rhetorical strategies; it is a subject that includes many important skills associated with speaking effectively and listening critically, skills that necessitate human audiences for their highest development; it is a subject that, of late, has begun to include analysis and appreciation of nonprint media; finally, it is a subject that includes not just functional reading skills but the literature of all places and times--fairy tales, folklore, poems, biographies, autobiographies, plays, novels, essays, and short stories. In literature can be found the fullest record of what is, and has been, the human condition: for literature permits us to enter the most private recesses of lives different from our own--different in sex, in time, in place, in circumstance; it presents us with values that enhance life as well as those that destroy it; it provides us models of human behavior ranging from the most depraved to the most exalted; it helps make us one with humanity by revealing to us our shared mortality--we are born, we feel, we think, we act, we experience, we relate, and we die. And though we do die, our literature remains behind, reminding those who follow of what it was, and is, to be human.

In short, our subject is both important and bountiful. Through it, we can provide students with exemplars not only of intellectual but of ethical excellence, and we can make available to them the knowledge, skills, and values

that will help them achieve the best, intellectually and ethically, of which they are capable. But to do all that we and our subject can do to better the lives of students, we need to have the fiscal and moral support of our communities, not just of parents but of the citizenry at large; and we need to be freed of the shackles that now bind both us and our charges, shackles forged by those who confuse products with human lives and who reduce a magnificent and variegated subject to whichever of its components are machine-scoreable.

Even freed from our restraints, neither we nor our students will ever consistently achieve that level of excellence for which each of us intellectually and emotionally yearns. But that is all right. Nobody who inhabits a corporeal body in a world of things is going to be perfect, and, as Browning said, "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?"

I am sure he meant to include women, too.

1. Emily Dickinson, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1955).
2. Courtesy of Radio Shack<sup>(R)</sup>, A Division of Tandy Corporation, Fort Worth, Texas 76102.